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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001343

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 PLANS FOR COUNTERING BERRI'S
PROPOSAL

REF: BEIRUT 1334

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) During a productive Saturday at the Serail, the Ambassador met on 9/1 with the Prime Minister, Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh, and Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad. The March 14 members were all discussing Speaker Berri's proposal announced to great fanfare the previous day to drop cabinet expansion as the opposition's pre-condition for negotiations to seek a consensus presidential candidate, while asking in return for a commitment for a two-thirds parliamentary majority to elect the president. Though Berri's motives did not fool anyone -- the pro-Syrian opposition would have a veto over the presidential election -- the GOL officials admitted that it was a clever piece of public relations which spoke to the wishes of the Lebanese people and was in concert with recent statements from the Patriarch. The PM is coordinating a response with his March 14 colleagues, and it appears they may offer Berri just enough rope to hang himself. The favorite of a number of options is to agree to Berri's conditions if he promises to remove the downtown tent city full of protesters immediately and require the resigned cabinet members to return to their posts. If he fails on the pre-conditions, March 14 can take back its promise for a two-thirds majority. If he complies, the constitution requires the cabinet to assume power at the end of Lahoud's term, if no president is elected, and March 14 has more than a two-thirds majority to take executive decisions in that venue. Checkmate or is (as we predict) Berri too smart to take the bait? We'll have to wait and see. End Summary.

2. (C) On September 1, the Ambassador, accompanied by Special Assistant, went to the Serail to meet with Prime Minister Siniora, Ambassador Mohammed Chatah and Roula Nouredine. When asked for a reaction to Speaker Berri's proposal, the PM said he had been offered "a card of no value (dropped demand for cabinet expansion) in exchange for a valid card of much value (agreement on a two-thirds majority in parliamentary voting for the presidency)." As Chatah explained separately, because the Siniora cabinet would expire (through a constitutionally mandated resignation) upon the assumption of

office of a new president, the idea of trying to form a new, expanded cabinet now is already "passed the expiration date," although Berri cleverly used it.

Responses to Berri's "Kind Offer"

¶3. (C) Using the high-profile venue of the anniversary commemoration of Imam Musa Sadr's disappearance 29 years ago, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri on 8/31 proposed that the pro-Syrian opposition abandon its demand for a national unity cabinet, in favor of the March 14 majority accepting the requirement for a two-thirds quorum for presidential elections (giving, in essence, the veto to the pro-Syrian opposition over the presidential selection). In doing so, the Speaker immediately appeared as having offered a great compromise, with even pro-March 14 media reporting his initiative in favorable terms. The PM, who agreed that March 14 cannot be seen as outright rejecting Berri's "compromise," said he had spent the evening of August 31 with his advisors debating three possible responses to Berri's proposal:

- Agree with the Berri on the need to negotiate for a consensus candidate, but refuse to accept specific pre-conditions (i.e., the two-thirds quorum) to these talks. This would allow March 14 to negotiate but to reserve the possibility of using a simple majority election at the end, if no consensus president emerged. Berri, he admitted, has refused this approach for months already and is unlikely to change his mind now. So this option is probably not viable.
- Agree to the talks with Berri's conditions, but renege on the promise in a few month's time if there was no consensus candidate. This was a particular favorite of Nouredine's who said it was "time to call Berri's bluff." However, others admitted the danger of having March 14th appear

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untrustworthy, just as Michel Aoun so frequently insists.

- Accept Berri's demand for a two-thirds majority, but only in return for the immediate removal of the downtown tent city of protesters and the immediate return of resigned cabinet members to their posts. According to Chatah, Berri will be told that only these events can create "conditions for consensus."

¶4. (C) Clearly, option three is the favorite right now. If Berri fails to respond to March 14's counterproposal, it is he who will appear to be the obstructionist. If he agrees, but fails to produce the real changes, then March 14 is relieved of its own obligations and can revert to a simple majority quorum for for presidential elections. And, if Berri does come through and there is an active and sitting Cabinet, it is they who will constitutionally inherit temporarily the powers of the presidency during a vacuum after the end of Lahoud's term, if the two-thirds quorum fails to produce a consensus president. In the cabinet, March 14 can easily muster the two-thirds majority needed to take all major executive decisions. This, as Chatah said, would be the pro-Syrians' nightmare, for it would leave all power in the hands of the March 14-dominated cabinet once Lahoud leaves office, so that fear should help induce the pro-Syrians to come to an agreement on the presidency.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador asked if Berri, an astute political thinker, would accept this counterproposal. Surely he can play out the options and can see that the March 14 proposal could lead to no president and a March 14-dominated fully empowered cabinet assuming the presidency until elections can take place. According to the Prime Minister, Berri's reaction is almost beside the point. March 14 must publicly counter Berri's proposal with one of their own, or else the Lebanese voters may view the coalition as obstructionists not interested in the country's political stability. Berri will look generous by comparison. "If it comes down to open

conflict, at least we can at least say we responded to their generous offer with one of our own," said the Prime Minister.

How to Make the Next Move

¶6. (C) The PM said he had discussed Berri's proposal with numerous March 14 colleagues on August 31, including Saad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, Amine Gemayel, Samir Geagea, Boutros Harb, and Nassib Lahoud. (Minister Mouawad's meeting with the PM followed the Ambassador's.) Most seem to agree with the third option mentioned above, but asked for a few days to carefully consider the implications before making a public statement. The timing is complicated, however, as the PM is due to depart on September 4 for visits to Rome, Berlin, and Cairo. He would prefer to respond publicly as soon as possible but, as he told the Ambassador, "you know what it's like to work with my people." He is also concerned about the optics of a public response which comes after international travel. He doesn't want it to appear that he is using talking points produced in foreign capitals.

Berri Actually Working for Vacuum,
with Aoun, Hizballah Preparing to Initiate Violence

¶7. (C) The PM also expressed his opinion that the new initiative was a very calculated and orchestrated move by Berri. He is sure this is another sign that the Syrian and Iranians do not want the Lebanese presidential elections to take place on time. Berri can use the two-thirds quorum issue to exercise a veto over any president who is independent of Syria and Iran, and the March 14 majority will refuse to elect a president who is subservient to Syria and Iran. So Berri's initiative is a well-disguised road leading to vacuum. Siniora also confirmed that he had heard rumors that the Syrian National Party, Aounists and Hizballah were rearming themselves for offensive battle. The PM is certain that these groups currently have enough power to make the first strike and spark a larger conflict that will spread with troubling regional implications.

Other Ministerial Reactions

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¶8. (C) The Ambassador and Special Assistant also met with Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh, a close Druse confidant of Walid Jumblatt. Hamadeh came right out and called Berri's proposal "a trap" and "an attempt to sell a government he doesn't even own." Hamadeh was concerned about going out on a limb with option three, as mentioned above. "There is no way we can accept a two-thirds majority requirement, and we should be very careful before promising to do so." He worries that, with only two months left in power, the PM may be inclined to act rashly. Siniora needs to think about the political fortunes of March 14 beyond the expiration of his cabinet (which is constitutionally required to resign upon the assumption of office of a new president). Hamadeh said Jumblatt asked for a few days to study the proposal, and Hamadeh agrees that this is wise. "We must protect the long-term interests of March 14. We don't want to rush into anything that could affect our rights in the future."

¶9. (C) During a brief conversation with the Ambassador and Special Assistant in the hallway of the Grand Serail, Minister Mouawad expressed grave concern about the public relations aspect of the Berri proposal because "it appears reasonable and attractive -- just what people want." She was on her way in to meet with the PM, but said that a clear and unified response would be required in order for March 14th to maintain its public credibility.

Comment

10, (C) Berri is up to his usual tricks with his clever proposal. By appearing reasonable and conceding the March 8-Aoun demand for a national unity cabinet now, Berri has successfully shifted the responsibility for deadlock and crisis to the March 14 leaders. Lebanese public opinion, sick and tired of the political spats and the stagnant economy that is the result, supports some kind of compromise on the presidency, as does Maronite Patriarch Sfeir. Berri appeared to deliver that yearned-for compromise, and everyone will look to see how March 14 responds. As a byproduct of his initiative, Berri has burnished his own credentials as a leader (vice simply serving as the Hizballah "mailbox," as Jumblatt wickedly but so accurately noted), since he -- not Hassan Nasrallah and not Michel Aoun -- was the one who offered, seemingly on his own, the generous gesture to March 14 and GOL leaders of giving up the national unity cabinet demand.

11. (C) The question is whether Berri is really ready for a consensus president or is simply shifting the blame to March 14 for the inevitable vacuum and crisis. If Berri is sincere in going so public in seeking a consensus candidate, then he has essentially broken with the divisive Aoun, whom March 14 MPs will never accept as a consensus. If Berri has broken with Aoun, then he could only have done so with Hizballah's blessing. But Michel Aoun's silence regarding the Berri initiative makes us suspicious. It is more likely that this initiative was carefully coordinated with the Hizballah-Aoun bloc, with Aoun told that the two-thirds quorum means that the pro-Syrian opposition will use its veto to block any other presidential candidate. Then, when the inevitable vacuum occurs, Aoun's chances become greater for some kind of extra-constitutional appointment, either now or during some kind of violent reaction. In any case, the burden is on March 14 leaders not to fall into a trap set by the wily Berri but also not to appear obstructionist in the face of a proposition that appears reasonable (or, as Sitt Nayla said, even attractive).

12. (C) The timing of Patriarch Sfeir's visit to the Vatican on 9/6 takes on more importance than ever, in the aftermath of the Berri initiative. While we defer to Embassy Vatican as to the accuracy of this, people tell us that the Vatican favors compromise (but, happily, also wants a figure who has a good reputation that exceeds beyond Lebanon's borders, with Nassib Lahoud having impressed Vatican officials). We know that the pro-Syrians have so frightened the Patriarch about vacuum and violence that Sfeir sees no way out except through a compromise candidate, even if that compromise candidate is a non-entity unable to stand up to Hizballah, Syria, and Iran. We are concerned that there could be sufficient overlap between Sfeir's worries, Vatican

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thinking, and Berri's initiative that March 14 leaders are cornered well in advance of the expiration of Lahoud's term into accepting a weak president. To the extent that the Vatican and the Patriarch can come up with a strategy by which all Christian MPs, regardless of their political affiliation, feel that they have no choice but to show up to the parliament to vote for a president, then the question of quorum becomes less important. Berri -- along with his Hizballah, Syrian, and Iranian masters -- is using the quorum issue to force his will upon the question of presidential succession. The Vatican and Patriarch may be able to remove this card from his hand, in a way that allows a more credible candidate to emerge the winner.

FELTMAN